

Israel Singer
Secretary General, World Jewish Congress

Testimony Before the Committee on Banking and Financial Services
U.S. House of Representatives
2/09/00

Mr. Chairman,

It is a distinct honor once again to appear here and testify before this distinguished committee. It is also an opportunity to convey to you our deep sense of gratitude and, may I say, for you as well to take pride in the extraordinary achievements you have effected since your first hearings on this subject some three years ago.

You might recall at those initial hearings dealing with Swiss banks, not one survivor had yet received compensation and no humanitarian needs had yet been addressed. The proposal for a humanitarian fund which was made at that hearing was realized. Mr. Chairman, I can report to you today that nearly one quarter million Holocaust survivors have received funds as a direct result of your efforts; survivors in need from Argentina to Zimbabwe, from Iowa to Israel. It is a lasting tribute to you and this Committee. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The larger Swiss bank settlement as you know is in the final stages of completion before the federal court in Brooklyn and the distribution of the \$1.25 billion fund is on track for later this year.

But as we have repeatedly said, the importance of financial restitution must not overshadow the priority of moral restitution - the honest confrontation and accounting of the past. In the case of Switzerland the dramatic revelations on Swiss refugee policy as enunciated by the Bergier Commission is the explicit expression of the obligation to seek historical truth.

Indeed the current world outrage directed at Austria because of Mr. Haider is, in our view, largely attributable to the moral tone that this committee has striven so successfully to inject into the discourse of world affairs and expectations of international conduct. I doubt very much if the Haider phenomenon would have elicited such universal condemnation just a few short years ago; that is, before the work of this Committee and so many others came to bear on world consciousness.

There is much yet to be done in Austria in so far as Holocaust-era assets are concerned. The recent settlement with Bank Austria was limited to that institution, and did not encompass the larger remaining claims against the Austrian government and Austrian industry. That settlement, however, demonstrated once more our insistence that the moral component must be addressed. Bank Austria not only made financial redress but also issued a statement of apology and responsibility for its actions during the Holocaust period.

So too in Germany we have seen an honorable expression of moral restitution. From the president of Germany, words of apology and the desire for forgiveness were expressed coincident with the creation of the 10 billion deutschemark foundation. Although, there are still difficult weeks of negotiation to finalize the terms of the foundation - and we should be wary that we have yet to succeed - the words of the German president must be understood as a powerful reaffirmation that this is a process whose centerpiece is not money but rather historical justice.

Tomorrow you will hear from Secretary Eagleburger on the painstaking efforts that are being made with respect to insurance claims. Let me express our unqualified support for the International Commission on Holocaust-Era Insurance Claims and the onerous responsibilities they have assumed. With all the difficulties - and there continues to be great difficulties - we wish to commend those insurance companies that are members of the Commission and are seeking to work things through.

Conversely, those insurance companies and particularly the Dutch insurers who have refused to join are displaying rank insensitivity to the memory of those who were victimized. When we say Dutch insurers it touches us also here in the United States as, for instance, the case of Aegon which owns the Transamerica insurance company. Globalization of industry has given Dutch insurers a wonderful market here in the United States. But in refusing to join the International Commission, they have not adopted global standards of behavior.

We appeal to our public officials to send a message to a company like Aegon. We should make it clear that their continued expansion into the United States market is an affront while they refuse to deal honestly with the responsibilities arising from the Holocaust era.

Make no mistake about it. The record of Holland during the Holocaust is sharply at odds with the popular conception. Holland had the worst record in Western Europe during the Holocaust - some 80% of its Jewish population was murdered. They were handed over by Dutch police. The Dutch were not the Danish.

The perception of Holland has been colored by the tragic Anne Frank story. But Anne Frank who was betrayed and died in a Nazi concentration camp had her furniture in the hidden annex removed by a Dutch moving company. So the failure of Aegon and the Dutch insurance companies is clearly bound up in the unwillingness to face the past - a failure of moral restitution.

Mr. Chairman, allow me to conclude with a specific proposal. This, the last of these hearings have had an extraordinary impact. I am sure you agree therefore that the issue must continue to be pursued. May I therefore suggest that this committee consider issuing continuing progress reports - say at six month intervals - so that the public at large remains informed and that the institutions

involved knows that they are still held accountable. This we believe would not only produce practical results but can serve as a lasting legacy of this committee's work.

Mr. Chairman, again let me express my thanks to you and the committee and with your permission I wish to be able to call on you in the future to help shape a world in which decency and fairness prevail.
